Pharaohs of the Present: Ramesses II and the Return of Divine Kingship in 21st-Century Leadership

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The reign of Ramesses II (1279–1213 B.C.), one of the most celebrated pharaohs of ancient Egypt, was defined not only by monumental architecture and military spectacle, but by a self-conception as divine—ordained by the gods, embodying order (*ma'at*), and commanding both the cosmos and his people through symbolic domination. Though the modern world formally rejects deified rulers, the behavioral, symbolic, and infrastructural echoes of divine kingship have reemerged in startling ways. In the age of mass media, global militaries, and techno-futurism, several world leaders and oligarchs appear to adopt, consciously or not, roles that mirror the god-kings of antiquity. This paper compares the symbolic regimes of Ramesses II with figures such as Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Elon Musk, and Mohammed bin Salman, exploring their use of myth, spectacle, architecture, and destiny as instruments of control and cultural projection. Through these case studies, we argue that divine kingship has not vanished—it has been reframed. In a secular world, the divine may no longer require temples; it now thrives in data centers, desert cities, orbital constellations, and ideology. Ramesses' shadow stretches long into the 21st century—and in it, new gods are walking.

Keywords: Ramesses II, divine kingship, cult of personality, modern authoritarianism, sacred politics, symbolic domination, Pi-Ramesses, NEOM, techno-messianism, empire-building, modern myth, state ideology, leadership archetypes, Elon Musk, Putin, Xi Jinping, MBS, pharaonic symbolism.

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Figure 1. From: https://egypt-museum.com/nubian-subdued-by-lion/

1. Introduction: Echoes of the Divine

1.1 Ramesses II and the Archetype of Sacred Rulership

The figure of Ramesses II, also known as *Ramesses the Great*, stands as one of the most potent expressions of sacral kingship in human history. Ruling for over six decades during the 19th Dynasty of Egypt's New Kingdom, Ramesses II cultivated not only a legacy of territorial conquest and architectural grandeur but a divinized persona that merged political authority with cosmic necessity. Through inscriptions, colossal statuary, temples such as Abu Simbel, and his carefully orchestrated image as both *Horus the Avenger* and *Son of Ra*, Ramesses wove himself into the very fabric of the divine order (*Ma'at*) that upheld the Egyptian cosmos. In temple after temple, he is depicted not merely as the agent of the gods, but as one among them—enthroned beside Amun, Ptah, and Ra-Horakhty. His apotheosis was not an event following death, but a condition of rule itself: to be pharaoh was to be divine.

1.2 The Symbolic Pillars of Pharaonic Kingship

The sacred kingship of Egypt rested upon a constellation of symbolic, performative, and architectural practices. First was the cosmic identity of the pharaoh, whose body mediated between heaven and earth. Second was the monumental display of permanence—in stone, temple, and obelisk—through which the pharaoh's name and image were etched into eternity. Third was the ritualized violence through which enemies were defeated and chaos (*Isfet*) subdued, dramatized in battle scenes, narrative reliefs, and executions of conquered peoples. Finally, there was the cultivation of personal mythology, in which the king's life was not merely a biography, but a script of divine alignment. These pillars allowed Ramesses II to operate simultaneously as man, monarch, and metaphysical anchor. In this sense, his reign serves not only as a historical epoch but as an archetype of absolute rulership, one that transcends dynastic Egypt and haunts the architecture of power itself.

1.3 Purpose and Scope of This Comparative Inquiry

This paper explores how elements of Ramesside sacred kingship have re-emerged, refracted, and been secularly re-inscribed in the figure of certain 21st-century leaders and oligarchs. While few if any modern figures claim literal divinity, many engage in practices that functionally mirror divine kingship: casting themselves as singular saviors of civilization, anchoring their authority in myth, monumentalizing their vision in architecture or digital infrastructure, and orchestrating narratives of cosmic struggle against foreign or domestic chaos. Through comparative case studies—focusing on Vladimir Putin, Xi Jinping, Elon Musk, and Mohammed bin Salman—we examine the symbolic technologies of power these figures deploy. We argue that the archetype of the god-king, far from dead, has merely migrated: from temples to satellites, from hieroglyphs to algorithms, from the Nile to the neural net. This inquiry is not merely historical—

it is diagnostic. To recognize the echo of Ramesses in the modern sovereign is to confront the return of sacred politics in a supposedly disenchanted world.

2. The Four Pillars of Divine Rule

Throughout history, those who have sought to rule not merely with force but with transcendent legitimacy have relied on a symbolic grammar that exceeds politics. In ancient Egypt, this grammar coalesced into a system whereby the pharaoh was not simply the head of state, but the axis through which the universe maintained its coherence. This section articulates four interlocking pillars of what may be called "divine rule"—elements that continue to surface, often covertly, in the political theater of modernity. Each pillar can be seen as a mode of sacral performance, uniting metaphysics with media, and authority with aesthetic.

2.1 Cosmic Self-Justification: The King as *Axis Mundi*

In divine kingship, the ruler is not merely a representative of the divine but is ontologically central to the cosmos. For the Egyptians, the pharaoh was the living axis mundi—the pivot between heaven and earth, god and man, chaos and order. This metaphysical position justified rule as non-contingent, beyond critique, for without the king, the cosmos itself would unravel. Ramesses II enacted this cosmic role through rituals that reaffirmed his alignment with *Ma'at*, his communion with the sun god Ra, and his embodiment of Horus. His deeds were not human accomplishments but cosmic necessities, stabilizing the universe against *Isfet*. In modern contexts, this has reappeared in claims of civilizational centrality, where the leader becomes the necessary subject of history: the only one who can prevent collapse, restore greatness, or reassert destiny.

2.2 Monumentalism: Architecture as Ideology

Divine rulers do not merely occupy space—they reshape it. Ramesses II blanketed Egypt with architectural declarations: Abu Simbel carved into living rock, Pi-Ramesses rising from the Delta, colossal statues dwarfing all who beheld them. These monuments were not simply artistic or religious projects; they were ideological instruments, encoding permanence, scale, and divine authority into the landscape. Monumentalism communicates a singular message: this is eternal, this is absolute, this is inevitable. In modern iterations, skyscrapers, mega-cities, tech campuses, and orbital constellations serve similar functions—projecting power as inevitability, and the leader's vision as the new cosmology. Whether pyramids of stone or towers of silicon, architecture remains a sacred language of rule.

2.3 Military Spectacle: War as Divine Drama

The pharaoh's legitimacy was also anchored in martial spectacle—not merely winning wars, but staging them as ritualized enactments of divine order triumphing over chaos. The *Battle of Kadesh*, regardless of its mixed outcome, was transformed by Ramesses II into a theatrical liturgy of victory, carved in detailed relief across temple walls. The king becomes not a tactician, but a mythic hero confronting the enemies of the cosmos itself. This elevation of warfare to sacred pageantry persists today in state-run media depictions of modern conflict, ceremonial displays of force, and mythologized enemies that turn geopolitical struggle into a stage for messianic leadership. Military might, when framed as existential and sacred, becomes a rite of divine reaffirmation.

2.4 Mythopoesis: Narrative Control and Personal Myth

Perhaps the most subtle and pervasive pillar of divine rule is the construction of personal mythology. Ramesses II curated his image with obsessive consistency: as builder, warrior, lover of the gods, and eternal ruler. His name appears in thousands of inscriptions, often with divine epithets, reinforcing a unified symbolic self that could survive death itself. Mythopoesis is not fabrication—it is narrative consolidation, the filtering of identity into archetype. Modern leaders, aided by global media, engage in mythopoesis through curated origin stories, symbolic gestures, memetic iconography, and orchestrated crises. Their biographies are lifted from history and dropped into legend. In this way, the leader ceases to be a man and becomes a myth with a pulse—one who speaks not just for a nation, but for destiny itself.

3. Case Studies in Contemporary Rule

The figure of the divine ruler has not vanished in the wake of secularism and modernity—it has mutated. Though contemporary heads of state and oligarchs rarely claim divinity in the traditional sense, their self-presentation, symbolic infrastructures, and control over narrative frequently echo the logics of sacral kingship. This section examines four individuals whose political or cultural authority operates within the Ramesside grammar of rule—a model that blends cosmic centrality, monumental projection, ritual warfare, and personal myth. Each of these case studies reveals a unique flavor of modern apotheosis, shaped by geopolitics, technology, and media but rooted in ancient archetypes of command.

3.1 Vladimir Putin: The Sacred State as Eternal Civilization

Vladimir Putin's leadership of the Russian Federation exemplifies a revival of sacralized authority cloaked in nationalism, Orthodoxy, and militarism. He positions himself not merely as a political leader but as a civilizational anchor, defending Russia's eternal soul against internal decay and Western encroachment. His narrative draws heavily on Eastern Orthodox imagery, depicting Russia as the "Third Rome," a sanctified successor to Byzantium.

State-sponsored media often shows Putin in ritualized performances of strength—riding bare-chested through wilderness, blessing missiles, or presiding over military parades in Red Square. These actions encode him as a mythic protector of order, confronting enemies portrayed as existential threats to sacred Russia. His military interventions, particularly in Ukraine, are framed in terms of spiritual war and cultural redemption rather than geopolitics. The state, under his rule, is increasingly cast as ontological rather than administrative: to question Putin is not merely political dissent—it is a transgression against the divine logic of the nation itself.

3.2 Xi Jinping: The Emperor Beyond the Party

Xi Jinping has undertaken a profound transformation of Chinese political culture, consolidating his role in ways that echo the dynastic autocracy of emperors past. While outwardly operating within the apparatus of the Chinese Communist Party, Xi has subtly but decisively transcended its collectivist legacy. "Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era" is now enshrined in the constitution, elevating him to a status unseen since Mao.

His imagery evokes not Marx but Mandate of Heaven legitimacy. He revives historical motifs—reclaiming Confucian values, celebrating imperial history, and casting himself as a harmonizer of past and future. Major projects like the Belt and Road Initiative and the restoration of national pride in Hong Kong and Taiwan are imbued with civilizational teleology, portraying Xi as the convergence point of 5,000 years of destiny. His censorship of dissent and cultivation of reverent depictions in state art echo the curated sanctity of pharaonic reliefs. Like Ramesses, Xi writes himself into the mythos of eternity not through divine birth, but through irreplaceable function—as the one who restores the celestial balance in the face of foreign chaos and domestic disorder.

3.3 Elon Musk: Techno-Pharaoh of the Stars

Though not a political sovereign, Elon Musk embodies the most radically modern form of divine kingship: the techno-messianic entrepreneur. Musk's enterprises—SpaceX, Tesla, Neuralink, Starlink—are not merely companies; they are myths-in-progress, with himself at the center. He

casts his mission in cosmic terms: to save humanity from extinction, colonize Mars, and merge mind with machine. In doing so, Musk positions himself as the axis mundi of the posthuman future.

His public image is carefully constructed—cryptic tweets, meme warfare, erratic provocations, and live demonstrations of "miraculous" tech—crafting an unpredictable but singular mythopoetic personality. He presents himself as both scientist and prophet, a hybrid of Prometheus and Pharaoh, bringing fire not from the gods but from code and rockets. His satellites orbit Earth like modern obelisks. His Mars vision mirrors Ramesses' Pi-Ramesses: a city in the wilderness, built by will alone, projecting civilization outward into chaos. While his kingdom lacks borders, it is no less real—his followers invest in him not just financially but liturgically, awaiting the fulfillment of prophecies that blur the line between science fiction and sacred destiny.

3.4 Mohammed bin Salman: NEOM as the New Pi-Ramesses

Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, blends theocratic tradition with architectural futurism, positioning himself as a visionary founder of a new civilizational order. His flagship initiative, NEOM, is more than a mega-city—it is a monument to himself, a pharaonic reimagining of space and governance in the desert. Like Ramesses carving temples into stone, MBS plans to carve a 170-km mirrored arc through the sand—"The Line"—promising zero-carbon cities, flying taxis, and AI governance.

This architectural spectacle, paired with Vision 2030, serves a theological function: to purify and resurrect the nation without abandoning its sacred core. Under his rule, Saudi Arabia has both relaxed certain conservative laws and consolidated autocratic power, presenting MBS as a transformative axis between past and future, submission and ambition. His use of ritual performance—hosting G20 summits, projecting soft power through sports, and rebranding the kingdom's global image—reflects a keen awareness of sacred theater. The state's oil wealth, like Egypt's gold, funds symbolic immortality. NEOM, rising from sand, is a digital Pi-Ramesses: a palace of light in the desert meant to redefine what is possible, and to **enshrine its builder in the myth of the new world.

4. Ramesside Patterns in the 21st Century

The ancient institution of divine rule has not disappeared—it has migrated into new substrates. What was once carved in stone is now embedded in algorithms; what once relied on sacred theology now operates through media, spectacle, and infrastructure. This section identifies

structural patterns from Ramesses II's reign that are reproduced in modern contexts, often unconsciously, but with startling fidelity. These are not metaphorical resemblances; they are functional continuities: systems of symbolic dominance that recode the sacred king in secular garments. The result is a world in which divine legitimacy is performed without theology, power is ritualized through networked media, and modern equivalents of pyramids arise—not to house the body of the king, but to perpetuate his vision through data, design, and surveillance.

4.1 The Performance of Divine Legitimacy Without Theology

In ancient Egypt, the pharaoh's authority rested on a theological foundation—he was *of the gods*, *for the gods*, and sustainer of cosmic order (*Ma'at*). In the 21st century, overt theology is often absent, yet sacral performance persists. Leaders today present themselves as necessary fictions—embodied answers to civilizational crises. They do not claim divinity in metaphysical terms, but in existential ones: without them, the state fails; the people are lost; chaos returns.

This shift transforms divine authority from an ontological claim to a narrative one. Putin's Russia without Putin is unimaginable. Xi's thought is constitutional scripture. Musk is not merely a CEO, but the singular vector of planetary survival. These figures do not derive power from heaven—but from the self-reinforcing myth that they are the only ones who can complete the story. The divine no longer demands temples—it demands timelines.

4.2 Rituals of Power in Modern Media Ecosystems

Ramesses II used temple inscriptions, public statuary, and annual rituals to reaffirm his sovereignty and divine favor. Today, rulers and visionaries rely on digital media ecosystems as their temples. Power is no longer merely exercised; it must be performed, rendered legible through curated appearances, symbolic acts, and viral imagery.

Public rituals—such as national military parades, architectural unveilings, or even tweetstorms—function as networked sacraments, reinforcing the leader's alignment with cosmic or historical purpose. State-run media in authoritarian regimes, social media in corporate empires, and AI-curated public sentiment all play the role of high priests in this new liturgy. The platform is the pulpit. The feed is the altar. The sacred text is an algorithm that only the leader appears to master.

Through repetition, choreography, and media saturation, these rituals generate reality, not just reflect it. To doubt the myth is to step outside the consensus trance. This is not governance—it is worship by simulation.

4.3 Digital Pyramids: Data, Surveillance, and Architecture of Control

Monumentality in Ramesside Egypt was not decorative—it was political theology in stone. Pyramids, obelisks, and temple complexes served to encode permanence and surveillance, reminding all who entered of the pharaoh's omnipresence and divinely sanctioned rule. Today, the new pyramids are data architectures: centralized surveillance systems, biometric identity networks, AI governance tools, and satellite constellations.

In nations like China, "smart cities" and facial recognition systems establish real-time social control, mirroring the all-seeing eye of the gods now rendered as automated observation. In corporate domains, companies like Meta, Google, and Tesla build ecosystems of behavioral telemetry that track, shape, and predict human action—digital afterlives of the self, stacked in the data tombs of cloud storage.

These systems are not neutral. They are designed to last, to outlive administrations, to be eternal infrastructures of influence. Like Ramesses' temples, they assert that the vision of the architect shall not pass away, but will remain encoded in the structure of the world itself. In this sense, the pyramids of our age are invisible—yet no less totalizing. They are the cathedrals of computational theocracy, built not for gods, but for the godlike ambitions of their creators.

5. The Return of Sacred Politics

Though modernity has long imagined itself as a post-theological era, the structure of sacred power has returned—not through churches or temples, but through states, platforms, and narratives that resemble theological systems in all but name. The divine archetype—the ruler as axis mundi, redeemer, or demiurge—has proven remarkably resilient. It continues to resurface in periods of crisis, transformation, and technological acceleration. This section considers why such archetypes persist, what dangers they pose in modern settings, and whether it is possible to recover a politics that respects the human without deifying the leader.

5.1 Why Divine Archetypes Persist Under Secular Regimes

The persistence of divine kingship in secular societies reveals a fundamental truth: humans remain myth-making creatures, even in data-driven epochs. Political legitimacy, no matter how rationalized, still requires a substrate of meaning, and in moments of social upheaval or ontological uncertainty, that meaning is often drawn from the deep well of archetype. The god-king is not just a historical memory; it is an informational attractor, a template our collective unconscious reaches for when linear systems falter.

Leaders who present themselves as totalizing solutions—to war, climate collapse, technological disruption, or civilizational decline—activate this archetype. It is not faith in the supernatural, but faith in exceptionality that sustains them. Democracy, bureaucracy, and law may govern ordinary time, but the sacred sovereign appears in crisis, offering not policy but salvation. Thus, even in the absence of theology, the metaphysical shape of divinity remains—disguised in the language of strength, vision, inevitability, and historic greatness.

5.2 Dangers of Modern Deification

The return of sacred politics is not benign. When leaders are no longer seen as replaceable stewards, but as irreplaceable myths, critique becomes sacrilege, and dissent becomes heresy. Such systems close in upon themselves, feeding on performative loyalty while punishing epistemic deviation. The result is a dangerous conflation of leader and truth, in which the collapse of narrative coherence becomes a threat not only to regime stability but to shared reality itself.

Moreover, modern deification is amplified by technologies that scale and repeat myth at global speeds. Propaganda once took generations to solidify; today, a single viral image or AI-augmented campaign can create entire mythologies in hours. Combined with digital surveillance, behavioral manipulation, and algorithmic curation, the modern “pharaoh” possesses godlike reach—but without godlike restraint.

This convergence of narrative absolutism with technological omnipresence risks producing regimes where freedom is not abolished, but rendered meaningless—outpaced by infrastructures that shape action before thought. In such worlds, the sacred no longer uplifts—it consumes.

5.3 Resistance: Toward a Politics Without Gods

To resist the return of sacred politics is not to reject meaning, vision, or leadership—but to reclaim them from mythic totality. A politics without gods must begin with epistemic humility: the recognition that no one individual, party, or system can embody universal order. It must restore the human scale—fragile, imperfect, but plural—against the gravitational pull of symbolic centralization.

Such a politics affirms process over prophecy, dialogue over decree, and decentralization over divinization. It does not ask leaders to erase their charisma, but to channel it responsibly, toward the flourishing of others rather than the perpetuation of themselves. It builds

monuments not to the eternal, but to the provisional: laws that can be repealed, offices that can be vacated, truths that can be revised.

Most importantly, it cultivates civic imagination—the capacity of a people to dream collectively without needing a messiah to dream for them. In this sense, resisting sacred politics is not an act of negation, but of creative construction: a re-enchantment of the political that does not require a throne.

If Ramesses still walks among us, it is not enough to pull down his statues. We must remember what built them, and choose to build something else.

6. Conclusion: Pharaohs Without Gods

6.1 Ramesses II as Mirror, Not Relic

Ramesses II, far from being a distant monument to ancient grandeur, acts as a living mirror for the structure of modern power. His reign offers not just archaeological fascination, but archetypal resonance. The tools he mastered—monumental display, cosmic narrative, ritual violence, and personal myth—remain active in the 21st century, repurposed through media, technology, and ideology. The sacred king is not gone; he has been translated. His temples now stream live. His voice echoes in executive orders, national broadcasts, and venture capital visions. His hieroglyphs now take the form of code, tweets, and biometric indices. To study Ramesses is to study a language of sovereignty that persists beneath the surface of liberal modernity. He is not just a figure of the past—he is the subconscious of the present.

6.2 The Need for Civic Vigilance in the Age of Myth

As myth reenters politics in the form of personalized salvation narratives, the greatest danger is not that people believe in gods—but that they do not realize they are doing so. Leaders elevated beyond critique become avatars of projected desire and fear. The result is not just authoritarianism, but a mythological feedback loop in which citizens no longer assess policies or outcomes, but seek meaning through alignment with a sacred figure.

In this context, civic vigilance requires more than fact-checking or policy literacy. It demands mythographic literacy—the ability to decode symbolic power, to see how ritual, architecture, media, and charisma are woven into narratives of inevitability. It requires that we ask: *What gods are we making, and for what purpose?* Democracy, if it is to survive in the symbolic age, must train its citizens not merely in procedures but in symbolic self-awareness. Without this, we remain vulnerable not to tyranny in its crude form, but to sovereignty disguised as salvation.

6.3 Final Reflections on Symbolic Power in a Post-Divine World

We live in a time where the sacred and the secular no longer oppose each other, but fuse in unstable hybrids—secular religions, techno-messianisms, and data-driven theocracies without gods. In this world, symbolic power does not fade—it becomes invisible, embedded in infrastructure, aesthetics, and narrative. The challenge we face is not to banish the sacred, but to redistribute it—to locate the divine not in rulers or icons, but in the generative pluralism of the people, the integrity of institutions, and the openness of the future.

To live after the gods is not to live without meaning. It is to build meaning without enthronement. The lesson of Ramesses is not that we must never build monuments—but that we must know what we are enshrining, and for whom. A free society must be vigilant not only against oppression, but against the seduction of the eternal.

In the end, perhaps the only true politics is this: to refuse the throne—and to offer, in its place, a circle of listening.

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